

How Europe Sealed a Pfizer Vaccine Deal With Texts and Calls

The European Union is about to sign a deal for 1.8 billion doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine after a dispute with AstraZeneca derailed its vaccination campaign. Here's how it came about.



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BRUSSELS — It was February and things were going from bad to worse for the European Union's vaccination campaign, and for its top executive, Ursula von der Leyen.

Much of Europe was in lockdown, people were dying and the bloc was running low on doses of vaccines after its biggest supplier, AstraZeneca, announced production problems. Critics inside and outside the European Union questioned Ms. von der Leyen's leadership and accused her of mishandling the crisis.

It was at that low point that she caught a break.

For a month, Ms. von der Leyen had been exchanging texts and calls with Albert Bourla, the chief executive of Pfizer, another vaccine supplier to the bloc. And as they spoke, two things became clear: Pfizer might have more doses it could offer the bloc — many more. And the European Union would be thrilled to have them.

That personal diplomacy played a big role in a deal, to be finalized this week, in which the European Union will lock in 1.8 billion doses from Pfizer, which, with its smaller German partner, BioNTech, made the first Covid-19 vaccine to get regulatory approval in the European Union.

The new contract will include a 900-million-dose order through 2023, with an option for another 900 million, Ms. von der Leyen said in an interview.

"I am convinced that we are in this for the long haul," she said.

The deal will establish the European Union as Pfizer's biggest single client by far; the company has so far sold 300 million doses to the United States. The contract will permit the European Union to resell or donate the vaccines to partners, empowering it to conduct vaccine diplomacy and support struggling efforts to immunize people in poorer countries.



Albert Bourla, the Pfizer chief executive, during a visit last week, at a Pfizer factory in Belgium. Pool photo by John Thys

Ms. von der Leyen and Mr. Bourla first connected in January, when the pharmaceutical boss had to explain why his company had to cut vaccine supplies temporarily while it upgraded manufacturing facilities in Belgium. In November, the European Union signed an initial deal with the company for 200 million doses, with the option to add 100 million.

As the improvements at the Belgium plant moved along with relative ease, the discussions between the E.U. leader and the pharmaceutical chief continued, both recounted in interviews with The New York Times.

As they talked, the pandemic was raging across Europe, and Pfizer and BioNTech were hard at work trying to step up production. To increase the companies' production capacity even further, the chief commercial officer at BioNTech, Sean Marett, was lining up regulatory approval for a newly acquired plant in Germany, which was already producing vaccines and stockpiling them in anticipation of getting a green light.

By the end of March, when the plant got its authorization, it had already produced 11 million doses, which were soon directed to the European Union.

An overcrowded emergency room in Bergamo, Italy, in March 2020. Fabio Bucciarelli for The New York Times

The calls resulted in a string of deals between the European Union and the companies. On Feb. 17, the bloc announced an order for another 200 million shots. On April 19, it activated an option to get yet another 100 million.

Accounts of how the deals came about, related by Ms. von der Leyen, Mr. Bourla, Mr. Marett and another nine officials and experts involved, reveal a striking alignment of political survival and corporate hustle.

In her interview, Ms. von der Leyen played down the political pressures she had faced, and said she had been confident things would improve.

“I knew that the upscaling of the deliveries would have a slow start by nature in the beginning, and therefore, I also knew the first quarter was going to be tough,” she said. But, she added, “I did not expect it to be as tough, because we did not include the possibility that AstraZeneca would reduce deliveries by 75 percent. That was a heavy setback.”

People lining up outside a public hospital to receive a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine this month in Barcelona, Spain. Emilio Morenatti/Associated Press

Mr. Bourla said he built a bond with Ms. von der Leyen.

“Multiple leaders of the world, they would reach out to me, from presidents or prime ministers and kings, and general secretaries of organizations,” Mr. Bourla said.

Mr. Bourla said he and Ms. von der Leyen had “developed a deep trust, because we got into deep discussions.” He said: “She knew details about the variants, she knew details about everything. So that made the discussion, way more engaged.”

Despite the deals with Pfizer and BioNTech, Europe is still playing catch-up when it comes to vaccinating its citizens. As of this week, 22 percent of European Union nationals have received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, in contrast to half of Britons, 42 percent of Americans and more than 62 percent of Israelis, according to Our World in Data.

A vaccination center at a velodrome near Paris. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

But the European Union has now made up for the vaccine it did not get from AstraZeneca — the bloc is suing over the missed doses — and has moved forward its target date for getting 70 percent of its adults fully immunized. It is now July, instead of September.

The bloc is already one of the world's biggest producers and exporters of Covid-19 vaccines, with just over 159 million doses shipped to 87 countries since December. That is almost exactly as many as it has kept at home to immunize its own people.

The agreement with Pfizer and BioNTech will stipulate that the shots be produced in Europe, bringing home not just the finished product, but also most of the 280 components that go into making it, Ms. von der Leyen and Mr. Bourla of Pfizer said.

The contract will also allow for a range of different vaccine products.

An internal European Commission assessment of the bloc's needs over the next two years, which is still being reviewed and was seen by The Times, lays out ballpark figures for how many doses might be necessary under different scenarios, although not all these needs would necessarily be covered by the Pfizer contract. According to the draft assessment, the bloc might require up to 510 million booster doses in 2022 and 2023.

Mr. Bourla said he expected a booster would be needed six to twelve months after people get their second shot, although some public health experts note that it is not clear yet whether that will be

necessary. And the assessment includes a worst-case scenario for a new vaccine to target an “escape mutant,” a variant of the coronavirus that is too resistant to existing shots. The draft says the European Union would require 640 million doses of this type of vaccine for two doses per adult. And it puts the number of pediatric vaccines at 130 million for 2022 and 65 million for 2023.

Vaccinations taking place at the velodrome near Paris in April. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

The deal is not without risks, or critics. Countries and experts worry that the European Union may be becoming too dependent on Pfizer, and failing to hedge its bets in the event of problems with the vaccine or its production.

“I would caution against going for Pfizer/BioNTech only,” said Prof. Peter Piot, a microbiologist who advises Ms. von der Leyen. “That is too high risk for me, scientifically,” he said, though he noted that mRNA technology vaccines like Pfizer’s have so far been working well.

Of the new E.U. deal with Pfizer, Professor Piot said, “My interpretation is, what works is who can deliver.”

Ms. von der Leyen said the European Union could still procure doses from other companies.

She said the bloc was following the development of protein-based vaccines made by Novavax and Sanofi, as well as mRNA vaccines from Moderna, which are already being used in Europe, and CureVac, which is under review by the E.U. regulator. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which was rolled out in Europe this month, is also attractive because of its single-dose regimen and easy storage, she said.

The Pfizer shot is also expensive. While the financial details of the new agreement have not been disclosed, the previous contract priced the shot at approximately 15.5 euros, or about 19 dollars, making it the second-most expensive vaccine in the region after Moderna.

European Union members will each decide whether they want to use their full allocations of doses, or leave some for others to absorb, or to be resold or donated. They will also be free to make bilateral agreements with other pharmaceutical companies for vaccines in the future.

The new contract does little to address mounting global calls for the release of patents or for technology transfers to ensure that more of the world gets vaccinated soon. With India in the throes of a catastrophic wave of the virus, and the majority of the world's population still far from getting access to a first dose of any vaccine, Europe's talk of doses for children and boosters seems out of step with global needs, health experts say.

And while Ms. von der Leyen says the deal will enable the European Union to help poorer regions, it reinforces the fact that the rich are still coming first in the global scramble for vaccines.

Ms. von der Leyen at the European Parliament in Brussels on Tuesday. Pool photo by Olivier Hoslet

Siddhartha Sankar Datta, a senior official with the World Health Organization in Europe, said he worried about how the deal would affect global supply.

"I think the bottom line should be that the access to this vaccine should not be a prerogative of the purchasing power of the country," he said. He said, "As countries make the effort to ensure their population base gets benefits, we have to still keep pushing ourselves to ensure more equitable access."

Still, for Ms. von der Leyen, and for the European Union, the deal with Pfizer and BioNTech offers a chance to remedy past mistakes.

"Europe has decided to make sure that, under any circumstances, they will be prepared if there's more need, and as a consequence of that political decision, they are now prepared to take much bigger risks," said Moncef Slaoui, who led the U.S. vaccine effort Operation Warp Speed, and is in frequent

contact with Ms. von der Leyen on E.U. strategy.

“Politics and science are intertwined here,” he said.